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Much Louder Than I Am: A Musical Collaboration

David Carlessⁱ & Kitrina Douglasⁱⁱ

University of Edinburghⁱ University of West Londonⁱⁱ

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Abstract

One challenge of performative research is that a performance is a one-time unique event. It cannot be preserved or returned to in its own form. Here, we offer a more durable artefact to preserve some aspects of the collaborative performance autoethnography we performed at ICQI in 2018. We write to communicate not only *what* we performed during the session but also our sentiments concerning singing and playing music as autoethnography. Because so often in our work we use songs, songwriting, music and performance, we propose rhythm, melody and harmony as alternative acts of autoethnographic collaboration. In this way of doing autoethnography, it may be that no words are spoken. But the burden of work is shared. This is the kind of collaboration we seek ... in the here and now.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, dialogical research, music, performance, song

Much Louder Than I Am: A Musical Collaboration

A man is digging a ditch. It's tough work. The ground is hard, dry, and stony. The sun has been up for hours, he's sweating, and beads of perspiration race the contours of his brow, down his neck, across his chest. He feels their course against his skin and knows their appearance is acknowledgment that the work is physically demanding, mentally exhausting, and spiritually draining. His hands are blistered, bloody, and raw, his back, shoulders, arms, in fact every muscle in his body, aches.

A figure walks toward him backlit against the sun's bright rays. He can't make out details but they are carrying a shovel. In a moment they take up position next to him and begin to dig. Shoulder to shoulder, side by side.

It may be that no words are spoken. But the burden is shared. *This* is the kind of collaboration we seek ... in the here and now.

Our words are to the left of the page, our song towards the right.

[David]

I don't want to ar-gue, dis-cuss, dia-logue, de-bate

Not today, thank you

I want you and you and you

to help me see

to help me say

to help *me*

with what *we* need to say

[Acoustic guitar starts: Spacious, ringing 6-string chords, picked gently]

So, it's colouring in, filling in

empty spaces with flesh-full tones

It is adding light

to what was black and white

[Kitrina starts singing softly]

Ooooh, Aaah, Aaah

It is joining in

not com-peting, re-directing, re-vising, re-working

not complex-if-ying, de-construct-ing, prob-lem-atizing

But standing together

Because no-one makes it here alone

I need *you* to stand with *me*

Shoulder to shoulder

To lock bodies – like a two-person scrum

To hold on, bind tight, lift up and

... step forward

[David starts singing]

I got a way with words

I'll get away with murder

I've got a way with sound

that makes me much louder

than I am

[Kitrina harmonizes the second verse]

I got a tale to tell

I'm telling it to you my friend

Is there room for hire?

We're trading space and time

[The rhythm picks up for the chorus]

We're rolling aren't we?

Never struggling are we?

What d'you say?

[Music stops]

[David]

Kitrina! I see this clearly!

if only for a moment

The lines are aligned, the boxes boxed

I have got it right!

No longer bull-shitted

I have got it, *Right?*

But it's too bleak – impossible and hope-less

What I see ... can never work

It will only end in ...

[Gentle guitar picking resumes, Kitrina hums softly]

We need more colour, more harmony, more volume and more depth

To make what was worthless work

[David sings melody, Kitrina harmony]

There's a time to fly

and a time to wander

Coz an ocean of space

makes me feel better any day

We're rolling aren't we

Never struggling are we

What d'you say?

[Kitrina]

We are already at the political point

We already embody the point

We are already creating waves

already making –

sound waves

electrical currents

connectivity

you are making space

an invitation without words

"Let's collaborate!"

magnet-ism

drawing me

This is how we work

how we seek an answer

how we find the question

notice the absence

[David and Kitrina sing together]

Got a way with words

I'll get away with murder

I've got a way with sound

that makes me much louder than I am

Than I am

[End]

Reflections

Each year's Special Interest Group (SIG) in autoethnography signals an opportunity for autoethnographers to consider, share and expand our research practices. It also offers a much-needed opportunity for celebration – of what we *have* achieved and the community we have created for each other. This year (2018) we were charged with forging collaborations and thinking through or considering – for the benefit of our communities – what it is we 'do' when we collaborate *as* autoethnographers. We hoped our response to this call would reflect several interrelated aspects of the ways in which we collaborate and, because so often in our work (e.g., Carless, 2017, 2018; Carless & Douglas, 2011; Douglas, 2012, 2016) we use songs, songwriting, music and performance, we want to offer rhythm, melody and harmony as alternative acts of autoethnographic collaboration.

Of course, our performance at ICQI in May 2018 was a 'one-time' unique event. What we offer above, on YouTube (see Douglas & Carless, 2018), and in what follows, is a more durable artefact to communicate to others not only *what* we performed during the session but, hopefully, our sentiments concerning singing, playing and co-performing music as autoethnographic collaboration. In what follows, we reflect on some of those illusive

strands that can find their ways into the mix through writing/singing songs and musical performance, particularly those that contributed to the making of *this piece at this time* and in *this space*.

We perform the piece live, for each other, one sunny morning in July 2018. As we finish I feel ‘full.’ I want to speak. I have something to say regarding what was going on ‘in my spirit’ as we made this collaboration a couple of months earlier.

Kitrina: David, can I say something? The line “We are already at the political point” comes from my deep-seated feeling that there is a lot wrong in the world and that, as a collective, autoethnographers are already making their points really powerfully.

David: When you talk about “the political point,” it makes me think of a *critical point*. A time when things have reached some kind of crescendo. And it *is* a critical time now: it feels like democracy is quaking, the European Union is beginning to disassemble, global inequality is unprecedented, environmental meltdown is forecast and some say we’re perched on the edge of another world war. It’s not a good time. Few would say that it is. Within the qualitative inquiry community – our own backyard – we recognise that the old model of research isn’t working either, too often it fails those who most need help (Denzin & Giardina, 2014). We, as a community of scholars and as individuals, need to *do* something.

Kitrina: Things will only change if we take action.

David: What is it we are doing through this work then? What can a little collaboration like this achieve?

Kitrina: As autoethnographers we embody, through our lives and our work, the things that need to be said. By saying what we say in the way we say it we help can divert the powerful current going in the opposite direction. We create waves just by standing strong and holding our position.

David: By standing together, standing firm, being a different kind of presence in the world. Just *us*, working together in relationship, collaborating, can that make some kind of difference?

Kitrina: Critical autoethnography is already achieving this. For us, working with sound and music and song, I think we are able to do this too. We make our waves through *soundwaves*. Like electrical currents, fully charged, I feel that connectivity when we collaborate, when we sing together. *Something* – more than words – is going on here. Electricity. Connection. Something bigger than its parts, something set free in the performative space between us.

David: Is that what you're feeling, the energy between performers? Is *that* the electricity, magnetism – the *something* – that is created by collaborating in this way? Some sort of shared commitment and direction?

Kitrina: Ever since I met you and started listening to your music, I felt a space in your songs for other parts, for *me*. I felt so drawn to make a noise in those spaces! Simply by singing, you were offering an invitation to me to collaborate, to work together. You didn't need to say "Let's collaborate!" I felt a strong calling in and through my body to *add*, to step into the spaces you created. And over the years it is this that has drawn us to work together, to relate, *interrelate*, collaborate. It's not just singing for singing's sake. By standing against the current we are standing for a different way of being in the world and in academia. It's a stand *against* the conveyor-belt, output-obsessed teaching and research model. By the way we work, we resist that. We are joining *together* through collaboration, working against the individuated, hierarchical model that operated in universities.

David: Even down to who goes first author! Like Claudio and Marcelo say about deciding author order: "The coin will continue to fly!" (Moreira & Diversi, 2014). So, one of us does not go first because s/he 'led' the piece.

Kitrina: It is *our* piece, *our* work. We won't follow the alphabetical precedent. And because sexism is rife in the academy, we need to work against it.

David: I felt in this piece, perhaps because Stacy invited us to explore collaboration *through collaboration*, I wrote in a different way than I have before. I'm aware that my writing here was an offering to you. I wrote *to* you. I might even have written *for* you. We sat together to write the piece, working together in the same place and time, word by word. And I offered my writing to you in that moment – in the moment of writing – before I'd revised it, polished it, reflected on it, edited it. I made myself – at least I felt – vulnerable, by pouring this out, letting it out, and giving it to you, offering it to, before I could decide whether it was strong or right or good or useful. For me, that was a big step – to share personal material, in a raw state, through an in-the-moment collaboration – before reviewing or reflecting on it. Previously, I'd be more likely to work on a draft before sharing it with you. I'd need to know it was OK – good enough, safe enough, sensible enough – before handing it over. Whether it's a chapter, a section of a paper or even an email – I'd be likely to check it, weigh it, before hitting 'send'.

In this project, there was an invitation to collaborate through a genuine process of co-creation through interaction. It's not like The Beatles, where songs were credited Lennon/McCartney for publishing reasons but were primarily written, apparently, by one or other of them. So: Lennon writes *Ticket To Ride*, takes it to McCartney, who might add a bridge. Or: McCartney writes *Penny Lane*, plays it to Lennon who changes a lyric. I've heard Paul McCartney talk about their "co-writing" as a *competition*, rather than a *collaboration*. They'd try to outdo each other! But they didn't, it seems, create in direct relationship with each other. In the years since Lennon's murder, McCartney has allegedly taken legal action to change the credit on the songs *he* wrote to McCartney/Lennon!

Kitrina: And we see that academia too. In the sport and exercise field particularly, we see scholars “collaborating” on papers but they’re writing their own sections and lumping them together. That’s fine, but in my view its not really a collaboration in a full sense. Each writer writes in her or his own space and those chunks are placed beside each other. One person does not engage with and respond to the other in relationship. This kind of writing feels to me like separate bottles of water stacked together in the fridge. The big bottles retain their bigness, holding on to the most prominent positions. The small bottles fit in where they can. In genuine collaboration – working together in relationship in the kind of way I think we have done here – it feels like each writer’s different waters merge together to become an ocean.

David: Writers who share with each other, give to each other, learn from each other to create something more than the sum of their parts.

Kitrina: And music helps us to do that in different ways.

David: Something changes when the music comes in. A colour that was dark – grey or even black – starts to look different, lighter perhaps. The words hang in the air, but the music coming in is like the sun beginning to rise. It brings a new perspective, changes the emotional terrain, without necessarily changing the conscious meaning suggested by the words. The colour changes hue.

Kitrina: Those tonal shifts can be felt and experienced by the audience too. At ICQI, I felt very connected and plugged in with the audience during the performance.

David: Some responded vocally – by laughing – to the line “*I’ve got a way with words, I’ll get away with murder.*” They recognise the privilege of voice – of being able to write, speak, be heard – which can be used or abused.

Kitrina: Through music, we can both be on the same word at the same time yet sing a different note. Together, we can become harmonious. On our own, alone, we cannot.

David: We can sing in our own way, stay true to our own song, yet speak through a shared voice, through a song that neither of us could have created independently. So, we don't have to follow a research methods textbook – a 'how to' guide – there is room to follow our own truths, to be ourselves, express ourselves within a collective.

Kitrina: For us, music allows us to collaborate – to *interrelate* – more fully. It gives us the capacity to strike different notes, hold different rhythms, make different sounds that can hold and gel together to create something bigger and richer.

David: What you do, I can't do – you sing in a different key to me. And what I do, you can't do. We're not trying to copy each other or follow somebody else's procedure.

Kitrina: There is space for both of us. And through music other too can join with us, brining their own harmonies and voices. Even if it's just a "Mmmmmmm" that is sung.

David: Yes, and so, together, we are louder – we can make something more. Something much louder.

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Thank you to Stacy Holman Jones for giving us the invitation and space to collaborate through song. Song lyrics © D. Carless 2003. Used with permission.

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